
REVIEW: ZAI XUEBAOXIAGU ZHONG DENGDAI
'LAPANTHÈRE DES NEIGES' BY SYLVAIN TESSON

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Sylvain Tesson (Lin Youxuan 林佑轩, translator).
2021. *Zai Xuebaoxiagu zhong Dengdai* 在雪豹峡
谷中等待 [*La panthère des neiges; Waiting in
Snow Leopard Canyon*]. Xin bei shi 新北市 [New
Taipei City]: Mu ma wen hua shi ye gu fen you xian
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Cultural Enterprise LTD.] 256pp. ISBN 978-986-
359-860-2. (paperback 360 NTD).

Sylvain Tesson (b. 1972) is a contemporary French writer, adventurer, and nature explorer who attributes his philosophical reflections on life to his travels. These sojourns include motorcycling across the European continent, living alone in Siberia for a half-year, and joining a photographic team in Tibetan areas in China. His books have won various awards, including the Prix Goncourt de la nouvelle¹ in 2009 and the Prix Renaudot,² in 2019. In 1996, his first travelogue, *On a roulé sur la terre* 'We Rolled on the Ground', based on his bicycle tour, was followed by a series of travelogues including *La Marche dans le ciel: 5000 km à pied à travers l'Himalaya* 'Walking in the Sky: 5000 km Walk Through the Himalayas' (1998), *La Chevauchée des steppes* 'The Ride of the

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¹ The Prix Goncourt de la nouvelle is a literary prize awarded annually since 1974 in conjunction with the Prix Goncourt by the Académie Goncourt. Formerly awarded as Goncourt scholarships, this prize has been awarded in partnership with the City of Strasbourg on the occasion of the "Ideal Libraries" since 2001.

² The Prix Théophraste Renaudot, more commonly known as the Prix Renaudot, is a literary prize created in 1926 by ten journalists and literary critics based on the deliberations of the Prix Goncourt jury.

Steppes (2001), (*Carnets de Steppes: à cheval à travers l'Asie centrale*) 'Notebooks of the Steppes: Horseback Riding through Central Asia' (2002), and *Sous l'étoile de la liberté. Six mille kilomètres à travers l'Eurasie sauvage* 'Under the Star of Liberty. Six Thousand Kilometers Across the Eurasian Wild' (2004).

In 2010, Tesson lived a reclusive life for six months in a rustic cabin on the shores of Lake Baikal. His Thoreau-style experiences of solidarity revelation are recounted in *Dans les forêts de Sibérie* 'Consolations of the Forest: Alone in a Cabin on the Siberian Taiga', which earned the Dolman Best Travel Book Award in 2014.¹ Released in 2011 and co-directed by Florence Tran, the documentary, *Alone, 180 Days on Lake Baikal*² reveals the beauty of an untamed environment.

Two of Tesson's books have been translated into Chinese, and numerous related papers have appeared in Chinese academia. In 2015, a year after its publication, the Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House issued Zhou Peiqiong's translation of *Dans les forêts de Sibérie* as 'Zai Xiboliyasenlin zhong' ('In the Forests of Siberia'). Three years later (2016), Tencent Video³ introduced the film *Zai Xiboliyasenlin zhong*, based on the book. Liang Ruoyu prepared a traditional Chinese character version of the book *Beijia'erhu yinju zhaji*, published in 2020 by Ecus Cultural Enterprise LTD.

¹ The Dolman Best Travel Book Award (2006-2014) is now The Stanford Dolman Travel Book of the Year. Named after Edward Stanford, the award is sponsored by Stanfords, a travel books and map store established in London in 1853. The Stanford Dolman Travel Book of the Year is one of two principal annual travel book awards in Britain, and the only one open to all writers. The other award is made annually by the British Guild of Travel Writers and is limited to authors who are members of the Guild (<https://bit.ly/3IeaCVz>, 18 January 2022) (my translation).

² See the full documentary at <https://bit.ly/3o4rvdC> 29 January 2022.

³ Tencent Video, launched in April 2011, is an online video platform with popular content and professional media operation capabilities in China. A comprehensive video content platform, it aggregates popular movies and TV shows, variety, entertainment, sports events, news and information programs, provides users with video entertainment through PCs, mobiles, and living room products (<https://bit.ly/3GFroNo> 18 January 2022, my translation).

La Panthère des neiges (2019) was initially published by Gillmard Publishing House and sold over 400,000 copies (French edition). Frank Wynne translated it into English as *The Art of Patience: Seeking the Snow Leopard in Tibet* (2021), which Penguin published.¹ The traditional Chinese translation version *Zai Xuebaoxiabu zhong dengdai* was released by Ecus Cultural Enterprise LTD. in the same year. Lin Youxuan (b. 1987), the translator, is a contemporary novelist and writer who has received the First Prize of Taipei Literature Award for Fiction and the Jury Prize of Liang Shiqiu Literature Award for Prose and was renowned as "one of the most promising young writers of his generation in depicting the homosexual life."² Cai Mengzhe commented:

Lin Youxuan specializes in the mastery of subtle language. He moves between the popular and the vulgar, the classical and the canonical, and is sharp and clever in his jokes, reflecting the concerns of the gay community and society in Taiwan while not forgetting to criticize and provoke the mainstream hetero-sexist society.³

Zai xuebaoxiagu zhong dengdai narrates Sylvain Tesson's experience on the Changtang (Qiangtang) Plateau⁴ in Tibet, China, in 2018 and 2019. At the invitation of his friend and professional animal photographer, Vincent Munier (b. 1976), Tesson joins an expedition, accompanied by Marie Amiguet (Munier's girlfriend) and Léo-Pol Jacquot (their assistant and former student of philosophy), to find and photograph the snow leopard. Starting on the inhospitable, icy high-altitude plains of the Himalayas in early February, the group awaits the appearance of the endangered snow leopard after reaching Snow Leopard Canyon, where they live in shacks and caves for three weeks. They take turns watching with

¹ <https://amzn.to/3r57oy6> 21 November 2021.

² <https://bit.ly/3si3uBf> (7 February 2022, my translation).

³ <https://bit.ly/3si3uBf> (7 February 2022, my translation).

⁴ The Qiangtang Plateau is the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau's largest endorheic area, the second largest lake area in China, and the highest inland lake area in the world with an area of 597,000 square kilometers, accounting for a quarter of the Plateau's total area. Administratively it is under the jurisdiction of the Tibet Autonomous Region's Naqu and Ali regions (<https://bit.ly/3nY2lNV> 26 January 2022; my translation).

binoculars and eventually see the elusive creature four times.

The Chinese translation features five parts – a Foreword, Part One: Approach, Part Two: Square, Part Three: Apparition, and Notes. In "Foreword" the author explains his encounter and friendship with Munier and describes how he acquires the art of patience. In parts One, Two, and Three, the author chronologically presents what he sees, hears, and ponders in this exceptional geographic space.

"Part One: Approach" concentrates on their journey from Yushu City¹ to Budong Quan 'Unfrozen Spring'² and eventually to Maoni Gu 'Yak Valley'. They encountered high-altitude wildlife along the route, including foxes, yaks, wolves, and kiangs.

In "Part Two: Square," the expedition moves west to Yaniuguole Lake and a mountain plain on the edge of the Qiangtang Plateau. Tesson ruminates philosophically in sub-sections including "Evolution of Space," "Uniqueness and Diversity," "Instinct and Reason," and "The Earth and Blood and Flesh." In "Part Three: Apparition," the book's climax, the group returns to Zadoi³ and revisits Snow Leopard Canyon, a journey imparting patience and its human value.

This adventure is described with a touch of personal affection and mystification. At the sight of the primeval Snow Leopard, Tesson relates this mystical creature to two important women in his life - his mother (Marie-Claude Tesson) and a girl he loved - "A lukewarm, white girl living in the Landes⁴ forest close to nature and his horses, which he did not know or could not keep by his side" (107, my translation).

The quest for the endangered snow leopard evokes Tesson's subconscious trauma and reminds him of losing the two women.

¹ Yushu City is located in the southwest of Qinghai Province, in Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture.

² Budong Quan, Maoni Gu, and Yaniuguole Lake are fictitious names the author created to protect them from hunters.

³ Zadoi County, Yushu Prefecture.

⁴ A forest area bordering the Bay of Biscay in southwest France that extends north to the Garonne Estuary and south to the Adour River. Once a vast tract of marshland and moors, it includes the largest forest in France today.

Romanticism with strong literary sensibility and poetic nostalgia is evident in his recollection of this lost love. The sight of the snow leopard evokes his subconscious memories, the image of his ex-girlfriend and muse. A down-to-earth nature-lover and living far from the modern world deepens our understanding of Tesson's love for her and the similarities between her and the mysterious animal - both rare and precious, goddesses of Nature and peace. She lived in a self-built pine cabin on her own turf and was friendly with animals who accepted her. "She saved ants from a gutter, liberated snails trapped in thorns, and treated birds with injured wings" (105, my translation). Watching birds landing on her head, Tesson wondered, "Am I worthy of a woman birds alight on?" (109, my translation)

His memories flash by again, evoking his reflections on life and death:

Like a fleeting dream, this beast was the totem of the disappeared and deceased. My mother snatched away by death, the girl in the shady avenue, every and each apparition of this animal brought them back to me (174, my translation).

Tesson maintains his typical style of depth and philosophical contemplation, alluding to literary classics and historical figures from ancient Greek philosophers to postmodern deconstructionists elevating his writing to a higher philosophical plane, creating a literary feast for book lovers. At the same time, it presents challenges and may convey a sense of fragmentation to light-hearted readers. In their totality, his thoughts and allusions assist in constructing bio-ethical, anti-industrial, anti-modern, and agnostic views enabling him to forge a humanistic assault on man's non-humanistic destruction of himself.

Tesson reiterates how man enslaves Nature: "The world is going backward, and lives are leaving" (177, my translation). Facing our planet's decline of biodiversity and eco-crisis, Tesson worries that the world and human civilization will regress rather than move forward. As the human population increases and technology advances rapidly, he ironically predicts: "...the only promising prospect is we can have sex while eating insects in concrete boxes

with Wi-Fi" (177, my translation).

In the face of a degenerating world, politicians, scientists, and religious followers yearn for a better tomorrow, indifferent to the present moment. Contrary to such selfishness, Tesson calls on us to admire what is before us, "...to be content with the world and to fight for its survival" (180, my translation).

Readers are given a breathtaking picture of Snow Leopard Canyon, located in the Far East, seasoned with insightful commentary on modern civilization, man-nature relationships, and contradictions between degradation and technologization of the world. For example, when lamenting the domestication of wild yaks in the first chapter, Tesson compares the destiny of the animal with that of man:

Wild yaks are repositories of myth. State breeders sometimes captured a specimen to reproduce and reinvigorate the domestic generations. The fate of yaks resembles a modern fable: violence, strength, mystery, and glory flowing back into this mundane world. The urban man of this technologized Western world has also been domesticated. I confess that I am the most representative. Warmly cocooned in my apartment, obsessed with my electronic devices and busy recharging all the screens, I had given up the fire of living itself (39, my translation).

Tesson's self-reflection reminds us that leisure and patience have become rare luxuries in our hectic, noisy life. In a fast-paced society propelled by high technology, modern people experience enormous pressure to pursue worldly success, ignoring the beauty of poetry and Nature. At the sight of Tibetan animals, Tesson mocks man's indifference to the importance of life and liberty and revives the essence of romantic humanism.

In encountering the sheer magnitude of the natural environment, Tesson ponders the contradictions of human instinct and reason. For example, in Chapter Two, he comments:

Our cerebral cortex is a lethal weapon empowering us to do everything. We can force the world to submit to our intelligence; we can live in any natural environment of our choice.... our misfortune is that we cannot choose where to live we are not deprived of instincts; instead, we

are encumbered with too many instincts.... Man suffers from his genetic indeterminacy: the price paid is indecision (84, my translation).

Exposing the Hamlet-like indecisiveness and vanity of human nature, the author expresses concern for man's future and suggests slowing down, waiting patiently, and discovering beauty in life as critical in resolving inner chaos.

Tesson, at times, employs his understanding of Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Hinduism in his reflections, and sometimes humorously, e.g., "Tubo is a Garden of Eden installed with an air conditioner" (46, my translation). "...stepping cautiously, every bundle of muscles summoned, every movement balanced and mastered, a perfect demonstration of dynamic mechanics" (156, my translation).

Tesson dubs the snow leopard a female regent (121) and a perfect continuation of in-balance Yin and Yang. He also gives her masculinity and strength, characterizing her flawless mechanical instrumentality through vivid descriptions of her hunting: "This is how the snow leopard hunts: it pounces on its prey and bites down tightly..." (165, my translation).

Tibet's biodiversity features yaks, foxes, vultures, wolves, Tibetan snow-cocks, wild donkeys, antelopes, titmice, Tibetan gazelles, snow leopards, and other key protected wild animals in China. It is also a gathering ground of mysticism. For example, upon reaching sacred Yaniuguole Lake, Tesson comments, "Taoism is a Chinese worldview in a land of Buddhism. Taoism promotes inaction (doing nothing), whereas Buddhism promotes desirelessness" (79, my translation).

"Tao" forms the theoretical basis of Chinese mysticism with "nature and inaction" at the core of Taoism – "a deep ecology in its own right" (Dong and Yang 2008:202, my translation). Contrary to the wanton destruction of the natural environment and human disruption of the harmonious relationship between all things in Nature in modern society, Taoism and its egalitarian ethics interpret Nature holistically. In this vein, Tesson appeals for bonds between humans and animals by condemning hunters' evil actions.

Taoism abides by the rules of intuition. Tao is the origin of the universe, the master of human society. It emerged before all else. The essence of the Tao is pure and natural, to be free and unattached. In this sense, Tesson comprehends the gist of ancient Chinese philosophy that interprets the law of all living holistically and intuitively.

Tibet calms Tesson. Patiently waiting for the snow leopard brings self-reconciliation, and his alteration between motion and immobility flaunts an extraordinary way of life and spiritual heights.

Before this pilgrimage, Tesson regarded distance and motion as symbolic of life and living such that "...motionlessness was only regarded as a death rehearsal" (17, my translation). This journey upends this view. For just a glimpse of a snow leopard, Tesson and his companions must wait silently for hours without moving or making a sound, enduring the thin air and brutal cold. Their vigil becomes an act of faith since many have pursued the snow leopard for years in vain. Tesson gradually learns to embrace patience and silence as virtues as they keep watch. When the snow leopard, the holy spirit of the mountains, presents itself, Tesson realizes what we have lost in the modern world's commotion. The simple act of waiting proves to be an antidote to the frenzy of our times. He confides in an interview, "What travels can no longer give me what I should take from stillness – peace and tranquility."¹

The description of children in the Tibetan family Tesson and his team stay with at night add to an exotic picture of rare innocence and man being part of Nature. Gongba and other boys with "a wisp of snot from their nose and a smile on their lips" (151, my translation) are familiar with the high-altitude natural environment and spot the snow leopard immediately when Munier shows them a photo taken a few years earlier. A falcon in the photo is obvious, but Tesson and his team were unaware of the snow leopard in the photo.

The book's traditional Chinese character version is in vertical columns highlighting traditional Chinese culture. Lin adds numerous annotations and notes that give readers a better

¹ <https://bit.ly/3Idk2k3> 18 January 2022 (my translation).

understanding of the content and origins of the allusions Tesson uses in the context of Judeo-Christian and Greek-Roman literary traditions. Loyal to the original text, Lin employs his translator's skills and literary talent. For example, when describing passengers on a Paris suburban train, Tesson writes, "A group of handsome and mournful African Fulani knights" that Lin renders "a group of handsome African Don Quixote" (26, my translation) and explains: "the only possible allusion here is to Don Quixote's nickname 'The Bitter Face'" (210, my translation).

The acknowledged Chinese name of Tibet is Xizang, which Lin renders "Tubo," a term adopted by the Tibetan government-in-exile in the late twentieth century (6, my translation), and is unacceptable to mainland China readers.

This book provides perspectives on travel and the history and culture of the Tibetan region. Tibet, often imagined as a sacred place, has become an increasingly accessible and popular tourist destination. Tesson's interpretation of natural and humanistic aspects of Tibet that are absent from our daily lives seeks to satisfy spiritual needs. Reaching beyond the familiar format of American-style travel adventure with reflections on nature and philosophical lessons, tourists and nature explorers can now travel in Tibetan areas with Tesson.

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NON-ENGLISH TERMS

Ali 阿里, mnga' ris མངའ་རིས།

Beijia'erhu yinju zhaji

贝加尔湖隐居札记

Budong Quan 不冻泉, mu tig

tshwa chu མུ་ཏིག་ཇུ།

Cai Mengzhe 蔡孟哲

Changtang, Qiangtang 羌塘,

byang thang བྱང་ཐང་།

Gongba 贡巴, mgon po

མགོ་པོ།

Lancang 澜沧, rdza chu ལྷ་ཇུ།

Liang Ruoyu 梁若瑜

Liang Shiqiu 梁实秋

Lin Youxuan 林佑轩

Maoniugu 牦牛谷

Naqu 那曲, nag chu ནག་ཇུ།

Qinghai 青海, mtsho sngon

མཚོ་ཐོག་།

Tao 道

Tubo 吐蕃, thu b+hod ཐུ་བོད་།

Wu Jing 吴晶

Xizang 西藏

Yaniuguole 雅牛果勒

Yushu 玉树, yul shul ཡུལ་ཤུལ་།

Zadoi 杂多, rdza stod ལྷ་སྟོད་།

Zai Xiboliyasenlin zhong

在西伯利亚森林中

Zai Xuebaoxiagu zhong

dengdai 在雪豹峡谷中等

待

Zhaqu 札曲, rdza chu ལྷ་ཇུ།

Zhao Junshuai 赵军帅

Zhou Peiqiong 周佩琼